



## Studies in Second Language Learning and Teaching

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### *Circular seating arrangements: Approaching the social crux in language classrooms*

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#### Abstract

Circular seating arrangements can help instill a sense of belonging within classroom communities with overall positive effects on learning, emotions, and well-being. Yet students and their teachers within certain language classroom contexts, due to sociocultural limitations, may be relegated to learning in antisocial environments instilled partly by rank-and-file seating. Attributions for teacher demotivation can often lie in student misbehaviors, while student demotivation, silence, and resistance relate strongly to lack of bodily displays and physical affordances of interpersonal care, understanding, and trust that, if present, would contribute positively to many social aspects of their learning and identity formation. Specifically, rank-and-file seating constricts the area in the classroom most likely to dispose attention and interest to the learning and to others, whereas circular seating potentially expands this area, known as the action zone, to the whole classroom. Seating arrangements therefore can play an important role in the formation of interpersonal dynamics and identity formation among students and their teachers. In this paper, the purposes and ways of using circular seating in language classrooms will be explored from a social psychological perspective. Language teachers are invited to imagine and experiment with possibilities for uses of different seating arrangements in their own classrooms.

**Keywords:** action zone, belonging, near peer role models, group framing of motivation, sociopetal spaces

## 1. Introduction: Gathering around

Desks bolted to floors, rules forbidding rearrangement of classroom furniture and equipment, discouraging remarks from senior colleagues, fear of committing a culturally insensitive practice, and a recurring notion that it makes students squirm, stammer, and shrink; against these counterforces, whole-class circular seating arrangements seemed patently unsuitable for Japanese classrooms of English as a foreign language (EFL). However, through trial and error over several years in the classroom, I endeavored to discover ways to implement circular seating with positive effects that improved listening and speaking, nonverbal communication, motivation, and group dynamics. In the process I began to understand how circular seating in any classroom context might not only be relevant for learning but crucial for well-being.

Circular seating now helps me to transform apathy and resistance in my classes into participation and enthusiasm through what I call the *social crux*, which is the “sustained connections between people through mutual engagements of imagination that sparks communities into learning and action” (Falout, 2013, p. 133). The social crux conveys a tipping point that “relates to qualities of human experience somewhat missing, yet terribly needed, for motivational transformations of learning EFL in Japan” (p. 145). The social crux represents a probability that enough socializing affordances and meaningful interaction within a group will invigorate the group into mutually supporting, while individually suitable, adaptive self-regulating behaviors.

After establishing key educational deficiencies in university EFL classrooms in Japan, this paper explains from a social psychology perspective the inherent and universal engagingness of circular arrangements of people and the related positive potentials for students. The paper then builds a principled approach, which I call *classcraft*, for applying circular seating arrangements in language learning classrooms within contexts both acquainted and unacquainted with this practice. Especially for teachers who do not readily have freedom of choice regarding classroom allocations, seating arrangements, and class sizes, a discussion follows for encouraging *high-hope thinking* as a means to pursue possible alternatives.

The term circular seating may be understood in reference to a range of circular-like patterns, including ovals, irregular circles, broken circles, and semi-circle seating patterns. Additionally, it is notable that no single seating pattern should be considered as optimal for all situations and uses. One of the aims of this paper is to invite teachers to imaginatively expand their own flexibilities in rearranging student locations and activities within given sociocultural and physical boundaries inherent to their context of teaching, for the purpose of improving teaching, learning, and living.

## 2. Sitting in silence

Japanese EFL students may be best known in the field of applied linguistics for exhibiting motivational crisis (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2011; Ushioda, 2013). This would predictably have an adverse effect on teacher motivation. One study (Sugino, 2010) used a questionnaire with 37 potential causes of teacher demotivation that included student behaviors, class facilities, teaching materials, employment conditions, and relationships with administrators. Participating were 97 university English teachers, spanning a range of differences in their first language, years of professional experience, gender, and service to a public or private school. The results showed that five of the top seven demotivators of university English teachers related to student behaviors. Specifically these were, in descending order: using cell phones in class, sleeping, acting in a rebellious manner, not responding verbally, and lacking interest in studying. Many university English teachers in Japan face problems with student apathy and resistance, whether the classroom population represents academically underprivileged or elite backgrounds, and the experiences can take a toll on teachers' emotional lives (Sakui & Cowie, 2008).

The following account illustrates the poignant shock of a teacher unfamiliar with this educational environment. Nanette Potee (2002), experienced with teaching university classes in America, relates her first day teaching a class at a university in Japan:

I felt excited and slightly nervous, but confident. I had taught this introduction to communication course several times before and was looking forward to the new class I was about to encounter. All thirty students were sitting quietly in their seats, facing forward. I introduced myself, explained a bit about the course, and asked for questions or comments. I waited, and waited, and then prompted again . . . What I got was blank, slightly embarrassed stares (eyes averted or down) and silence . . . After several more failed attempts at getting students motivated to start a discussion, I gave up. I was at a loss. I wasn't quite sure how to continue . . . My confidence was shaken and I suddenly felt very discouraged. What was I doing wrong? Why weren't they talking? This type of activity had always worked in my classes at home. (p. 207)

Optimistic, Potee carried forward in her teaching, learning how she and her students could adjust to each other's classroom expectations. Meanwhile, she also conducted a substantial study on student demotivation to understand why high school students in Japan withdraw from engaging in the classroom and studying English. Although the reasons were varied, feelings of demotivation were often attributed to boredom with teacher-fronted lessons and sense of alienation from the teacher. Potee (2002) drew two clear implications. First, teachers might try to

become aware about the psychologies of their students, and second, display care toward their students as people, allowing students to feel close to the teacher.

Further reports about problems within English classrooms in Japan at the tertiary level can be found. For example, King (2012) conducted an extensive study on student silence. He observed over 900 university students in 30 different English classrooms, with a mean attendance of 29 students, for 48 total hours. Almost 40% of the students' time was spent listening to the teacher, 8% listening to other students, 7% conversing in pair or group talk, and 20% disengaging from learning in off-task behaviors. Students initiated talk in English seven times, which was 0.04% of the total observation time (King, 2012, p. 10). Although many of these classrooms featured seating arrangements designed to promote group work, only one class session from the entire data set "made use of what could be loosely termed a circular seating arrangement. This class had only 9 students and had relatively high levels of oral participation in comparison to the rest of the sample" (J. King, personal communication, January 20, 2014).

King (2012) identifies five pedagogical, socio-dynamic influences perpetuating silence in these classrooms. First, there exists much *student apathy* toward learning English, particularly with non-English majors, combined with a widespread *acceptance of student disengagement* (usually sleeping during class) across the educational system. King notes that this type of silence prevailed throughout the study, and most often occurred in large-sized, teacher-centered classrooms in which the teacher traditionally lectures from the front.

Related to this first perpetuator of silence is the second, namely the primary method of instruction, *grammar-translation*, taught within teacher-centered classrooms in which students are rarely invited to voice their thoughts or vocalize at all. Third, in addition to listening to the teacher, much time is also spent listening to audio recordings, reading, and writing. Therefore even when students are on task, the *tasks do not require speaking in English*. Fourth, an apparent *confusion arises when students are requested to talk* in pairs or groups. A variety of reasons for this might include lack of scaffolding or time for the students to prepare for the task, lack of familiarity with doing the tasks or using the language, unclear directions from the teacher about the task, and passive aggression from the students to avoid doing the tasks. Fifth, a general enculturated trait of *excessive self-monitoring or hypersensitivity to being judged poorly by others* results in silent withdrawal as a means of self preservation against the threat of unwanted attention and embarrassment.

### 3. Action zones

We can easily recognize a simple physical arrangement common to human communication and education spanning diverse geographic locales and histori-

cal periods. The following iconic images depict brief snapshot moments within broader cultural practices, which themselves suggest something *elemental*—meaning a fundamental force of nature—about human life and learning.

*Prehistoric humans gathered in repose around settling bonfire embers.* Youth camps, outdoor recreation centers, and corporate retreats now feature campfire talks for sharing tales, skits, and ditties. *Socrates poised in dialectical exchange with engrossed pupils surrounding.* Large scale academic lecture halls today bend tiers of students around their teacher, while an electrical public address system brings an individual's inquiry or viewpoint into the unfolding dialogue. *Thousands of Romans, in mass cheer to gladiators in battle, splayed around the stands of the Colosseum.* From community park arenas to Olympic-sized international stadiums, sports and entertainment audiences worldwide exhibit much enthusiasm for the audience itself. They show each other their colors, shout their expectations, and sometimes in a massive display of coordinated grace, rise to their feet and settle in rolling groups to create "the wave." *Knights comport with King Arthur at the Round Table.* In many of today's parliaments and houses of representatives, members sit side by side in curved rows radiating into concentric circles—an array of democratic procession—deliberating the administrations of their country. *Native Americans cluster and circumrotate to bolster faith and hope during their Ghost Dance.* Dances, prayers, songs, dramas, and games have been performed in circles for ages, with all ages, for encouragement and enlightenment.

Circular physical arrangements such as these endure because of the powerful influences that people can have on each other when participating in these formations. "The circle itself has become a worldwide symbol of unity and strength and simply sitting in a circle promotes the same effect" (Pease & Pease, 2006, p. 339). Social interaction is encouraged by *sociopetal spaces*, such as a small circle of chairs around a coffee table, and discouraged by *sociofugal spaces*, such as airport waiting lounges (Forsyth, 2006). Sociopetal spaces can bring people together, excite their senses, endear each one to the others, create an atmosphere of mutual care, and stimulate the entire circle into a social *action zone*.

Action zones in classroom settings are identified as areas in which the most interest, excitement, and class participation takes place (Marx, Fuhrer, & Hartig, 2000). Innumerable classroom features and interpersonal variables might dispose the formation of many types of action zone patterns. However, a common feature in many usual-sized classrooms with row-and-column seating, all facing forward toward the teacher standing front and center, is an action zone ranging across the front rows and down along the aisles directly facing the teacher, forming an inverted T-shape pointing away from the teacher. At times this shape may fill out into a triangle, with the action zone dissipating

toward the back and center of the room at the tip of the triangle, and intensifying toward the row in front as its base (Figure 1). Thus action zones tend to form in relation to proximity, visual contact, and perpendicular orientation (i.e., face-to-face) with the teacher (Marx et al., 2000).

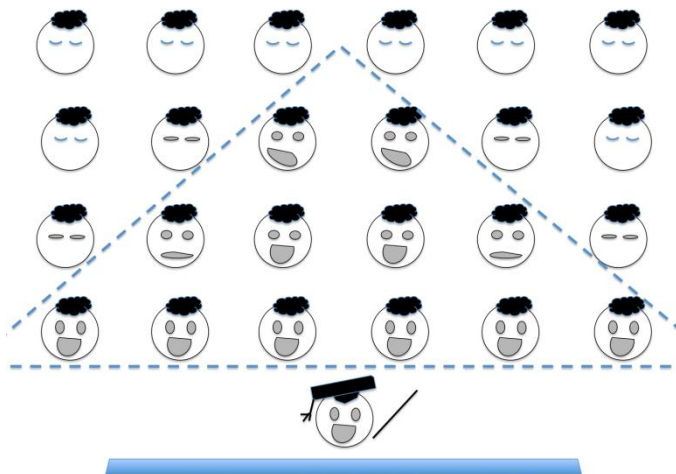


Figure 1 Triangle-shaped action zone formed in row-and-column seating

Academic achievement is facilitated for students within the action zone, while academic problems can arise for those outside of it. Due to their proximity and orientation, students within the action zone can see and hear the teacher and see the board or projection screen better, while the same is true for the teacher, who can best see and hear students at the front of the classroom (Wannarka & Ruhl, 2008), especially in large-sized classrooms. Even with classrooms of 50 or more students, teachers might believe they can monitor all students equally, even those at the back of the classroom. And although they may practice strategies for including all students within the lessons, such as asking questions to students seated in various locations and walking around the classroom, students sitting outside of the action zone may still not receive as much of the teacher's attention (Shamin, 1996). Susceptible to the teacher's neglect, these students start turning their attention away from the lessons and toward other activities, such as chatting or doing homework for other classes. In a vicious cycle, this encourages classroom-wide stigmatizing of students at the back as unintelligent and disreputable, which furthers in ostracizing them from classroom participation. In contrast, students sitting in the front may receive from the teacher more quality care and time in explicit, didactic-based communications, such as during comprehension checks, and in implicit, non-verbal signals that build in-group identification. Students in the front rows can

be both self-regarded and regarded by their teacher as more capable, confident, diligent, and motivated in their studies (Shamin, 1996).

Although students might sit away from their preferred areas in order to sit with friends, it has been shown that students often follow the same seating area preferences as they move from class to class (Benedict & Hoag, 2004). Students who choose to place themselves in the action zone have been empirically found to exhibit higher degrees of creativity, assertiveness, success, esteem, and attention (Marx et al., 2000). Students in large lecture classes forced out of their preferred front seats, which are in the action zone, to back seats, which are outside the action zone, retained the same probability of receiving high grades as they did while up front. Meanwhile, students forced out of their preferred back and side area seats and placed into front seats had an increased probability of higher grades, while students forced out of their preferred middle area and placed into side seats experienced a decreased probability of receiving high grades (Benedict & Hoag, 2004).

To summarize up to this point, a wide variety of age groups and cultures commonly display, within rank-and-file style seating, this T-shaped or triangle-shaped action zone. It is understood to form in part due to self selection by students who are more assertive and enthusiastic in learning and participating, and in part due to the influences of the physical arrangements promoting comparatively higher levels of concentration and retention for those who sit in the zone (e.g., Knapp & Hall, 2010; Pease & Pease, 2006; Richmond, McCroskey, & Hickson III, 2008). One implication is that classroom participation and academic achievement can be manipulated for individual students by seating placement. Strategically speaking, however, not all students can sit in the action zone at all times, and therefore at any given moment rank-and-file seating dually induces inclusion and exclusion around the classroom.

A meta-analysis (Wannarka & Ruhl, 2008) of seating arrangement studies concluded that row-and-column seating was least useful for tasks requiring social interaction, and most useful for independent work requiring quiet concentration. On the other hand, clustered desks and semicircle arrangements were found to be most conducive for peer collaborative work and communication with the teacher. From one study (Marx et al., 2000) comparing row-and-column to semicircle seating with 27 students, the students showed higher rates of asking questions to their teacher when in the semicircle. Attention, interest, and social action were encouraged because the semicircular arrangement could seat all students relatively close to the teacher with an unobstructed view of both teacher and board. Moreover, demarcations for action zones failed to emerge within the semicircle, indicating a socially all-includable nature inherent to this arrangement (Figure 2). In other words, circular-style seating can help turn a whole class into an action zone.

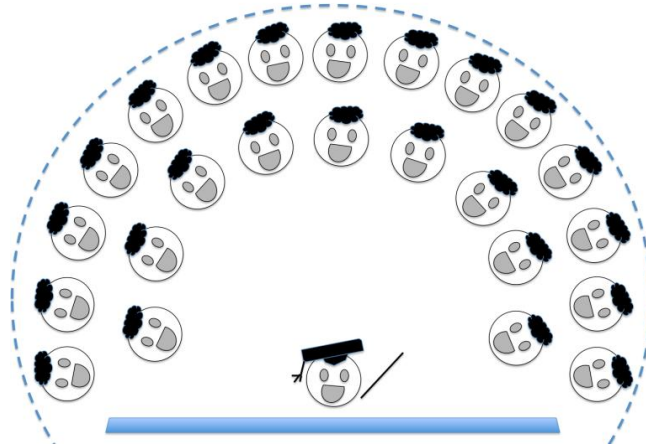


Figure 2 All-includable action zone formed in semicircle seating

#### 4. Social crux in circular seating

Circular seating by itself is not what brings people together; it is the people within this seating arrangement and how they feel, think, respond, and interact with each other, both inside and outside of the circle, that potentially brings them together. The probability that their sustained mutual care and meaningful engagement of their imaginations can transform into learning and action is what I call the social crux (Falout, 2013). Approaching this criticality, therefore, rests on the qualities of their relationships and values of their interactions. These qualities and values emerge and change over time. The cultivation of students' relationships and interactions may be aided by the interpersonal dynamics afforded in circular seating arrangements. Important for choosing to use circular seating arrangements is understanding positive social psychological possibilities for students, particularly when they are invited to share each other's experiences and imaginations, to "open up and allow their individual strengths to grow and permeate into each other's potentials and foibles and needs for social support" (Falout, 2013, p. 133). This section of the paper will explain reasons that the all-includable action zone of circular seating potentiates whole-class sharing of each other's experiences and imaginations, especially as they presently unfold before everyone in the circle, which may therefore help classrooms to approach the social crux.

##### 4.1. Inclusion, intimacy, immediacy

In designing their ideal large lecture halls, university students saliently focused on circular-style seating with desks or tables arranged in concentric circles up-



on elevated tiers, and plenty of natural light and acoustic properties for clearly seeing and hearing the professor, who was commonly depicted in the center and sometimes with a rotational chair in order to face each student (Bourdieu, Passeron, & de Saint Martin, 1994). The students also described mobility for themselves and for equipment such as screens. They likened their envisioned sociopetal spaces to architectural examples not seen traditionally for academic purposes, such as a "circular amphitheatre" and a "theatre-in-the-round," and provided reasons such as "advantages: much greater intimacy. The lecturer is close. Contacts are more direct" (Bourdieu, et al., 1994, p. 27). Social inclusion is propitiated in circular-style seating, as opposed to row-and-column seating, through *propinquity*, meaning physical proximity (Tharp, Estrada, Dalton, & Yamauchi, 2000). The degree of physical closeness may also engender feelings of *immediacy*, denoted by feelings of psychological closeness and positive affect toward one another, and conveyed in verbal and nonverbal communications. Immediacy experienced between students and teachers has been shown to improve cognitive learning (Richmond et al., 2008).

#### 4.2. Belonging, identity, empathy

No other external circumstance predicts happiness better than that which instills the sense of *belongingness*, which is a psychological need strongly related to physical health that is met when people have frequent and sustained contact with someone they feel mutually cares about them (Baumeister, 2005). Close relationships with others greatly contribute to ongoing formations of personal identities. People can both see themselves and experience the world through other's eyes, which expands their perspectives and understandings of self, others, and the world (Aron, Ketay, Riela, & Aron, 2008). Imagining how others feel fosters a formation of one's own identity in likeness with others and a sense of empathy for them. Thus watching others in distress can cause an empathetic arousal of distress in one's self. According to the *empathy-altruism hypothesis*, people help others in need partially for the purposes of altruism, which might be thought of as helping others for no apparent personal reward, and partially to relieve their own suffering caused by empathetic arousal. In short, the closer people feel to each other, the more they want to help each other (Baumeister & Finkel, 2010). Due to shared empathy and sensations potentiated when in a circle, as opposed to rank-and-file seating, students may more likely repress mean-spirited laughter over other's mistakes, offer help for those struggling to find the words to express themselves, and out of consideration give their undivided attention when others are speaking.

#### 4.3. Community, shared experience, shared space

Comparing multi-disciplinary team meetings held in different meeting rooms, one study (Li & Robertson, 2011) showed that in groups of 10 to 30 people, the physical arrangement of furniture and equipment and the space of the room could profoundly influence various communication methods and behaviors. A larger room with row-and-column seating for peripheral participants, a separate corner area for specialists, and a table off to another side for key participants, was shown to be less effective for clear and coherent communication processes than either of two smaller rooms with a larger percentage of the participants seated closer together and more or less around a central table. The more intimate and circular the arrangement, the more likely all participants could view the same thing at the same time, see referencing gestures such as pointing, and more readily involve themselves in the discussion. Moreover, the presenters in these rooms could deliver more cohesive presentations, better synchronize their messages with various projected displays, and better control the movements and positioning of themselves and various equipment, such as video cameras, flatscreen TVs, and lightboxes, in a way that facilitated the negotiation of meaning with professionals of various disciplines. Being able to see the same things at the same time and use a shared space contributed greatly to effective collaboration (Li & Robertson, 2011). With just a little time together in such an environment, new ideas, practices, and innovations are made possible through the work commitments that emerge out of the building relationships themselves. This sense of community can motivate the group toward empowering each other individually, the group as a whole, and through extended social networks, other groups in the outside community (McCombs & Miller, 2009).

#### 4.4. Attention, interest, enthusiasm

Circular arrangements help to focus the attention of students, which in turn provides a forum for interest, enthusiasm, and other positive emotions to intermingle. According to the *broaden-and-build theory* (Fredrickson, 1998), positive emotions can complement each other, expanding the scope of feeling not only other positive emotions in range and duration but also expanding the scope of cognitions and behaviors. Interest can function as a primary emotion that compels openness to new ideas, experiences, and actions. Thus interest contributes to exploration for new information, leading to developing intelligence, creativity, and personal growth, as well as shaping attention (Fredrickson, 1998; Fredrickson & Branigan, 2005). Attention, in turn, physically reshapes neural circuits, enabling new ways of thinking and learning from experiences. When changes in

their own thinking patterns are shown to them, students' metacognitive recognitions of their own and of their classmates' insights can become an energizing experience that contributes to sustained learning and desire for improving themselves and their world (McCombs & Miller, 2009).

#### 4.5. Dialogic energy, languaging, dialogue

The circle facilitates being physically exposed and mentally open to hearing the voices of others, indicating both their ideas and the language used to convey the ideas. Beginning to listen and then speak the new language and ideas one hears, called *ventriloquation*, is a process of appropriating these different voices for one's own uses (Wertsch, 1991). *Dialogic mediation* or *dialogic inquiry* involves teacher and students engaging together in activities and meaning-making that reconceptualizes and recontextualizes knowledge, and it develops both an individual's cognitive functions and a group's collaborative knowledge building (Johnson, 2009; Wells, 1999). In short, *dialogic energy* comes from "the ongoing dialogue, the vibrant 'chain of texts' of a speech community" (Wertch, 2006, p. 63) acting through and upon each other; wherein "one voice comes into contact with another, thereby changing the meaning of what it is saying and becoming increasingly dialogical, or multivoiced" (Wertsch, 1991, p. 90). As students gain multivoiced abilities, also known as *heteroglossia* (Bakhtin, 1981), they become more flexible and adaptable in their language learning and production. This happens in part because speaking and writing can mediate cognitive and affective development in a dialectical relationship (i.e., a mutually unifying process) known as *languaging*. "Through languaging . . . learners articulate and transform their thinking into artifactual form, and in doing so, make it available as a source of further reflection" (Swain & Deters, 2007, p. 822). When languaging together in a circle, the diaologic chain of texts is immediate, almost tangible, and is situated in a social context of meaningful participation. Similarly, Noddings' (2005) notion of *dialogue* may facilitate discovery:

Dialogue is open-ended; that is, in a genuine dialogue, neither party knows at the outset what the outcome or decision will be . . . Dialogue is a common search for understanding, empathy, or appreciation. It can be playful or serious, logical or imaginative, goal or process oriented, but it is always a genuine quest for something undetermined at the beginning . . . Dialogue permits us to talk about what we try to show. It gives learners opportunities to question "why," and it helps both parties to arrive at well-informed decisions . . . [by] not only to inform the decision under consideration; it also contributes to a habit of mind—that of seeking adequate information on which to make decisions. (p. 23)

#### 4.6. Social modeling, near peer role models, coping models

Students can become inspired to try an activity for themselves by watching others perceived as similar to them do that activity. This is also known as *near peer role modeling* (Murphey & Arao, 2001). Students may initially lack confidence using the language or feel frustrated that their abilities are not up to par with native-level fluency, but after observing similar others (i.e., classmates), students see more possibility for their own improvements and abilities, gain courage and make more effort to speak, and become happy with their own small successes (Murphey & Arao, 2001). Being able to observe everyone in a circle allows for the open possibilities of finding others in the classroom to identify with and emulate. Moreover, watching another student struggle to speak and gradually improve may be better for building confidence than watching another student speak flawlessly. The reason is that those who struggle, known as *coping models*, can show others that their determination and positive thoughts are effective at overcoming difficulties and making progress (Schunk, Pintrich, & Meece, 2008).

#### 4.7. Self-presentation (desire for positive peer evaluation)

Usually people want to make a good impression of themselves when observed by others. This is known as *self-presentation*, which denotes the difference in one's behaviors between public and private conditions (Baumeister & Finkel, 2010). A good impression, for some students, may mean attracting negative attention to themselves by misbehaving, perhaps for reasons of self-worth protection or self-handicapping, which provides them with social and personal excuses to perform poorly in the class subject (Brophey, 2004). But teachers can implicitly model and explicitly encourage the development of group norms that lead to interpersonal behaviors in the classroom supportive of mutual care and learning (Dörnyei & Murphey, 2003). Then with this sense of self-presentation, students in a circle observing each other would want to act in a way that contributes to building positive reputations and relationships with their classmates. Even half-heartedly going through the motions at first might matter, for the behaviors that people adopt simply for the sake of good appearances in front of others, rather than something done in private, have more tendency to actually become internalized attitudes, values, and behavioral patterns (Tice, 1999). In other words, even though students may initially be putting on a false air of willingness to speak, confidence, or other idealized classroom norm, because they are doing so in full view of their classmates in the circle, in the end they may come to view themselves as possessing these positive attributes.

#### 4.8. Person-in-context (self expression)

Another aspect of how students portray themselves involves a complex interplay of each student's unique sense of identity within co-constructing relationships of the identities of others within the social learning environment. Recognized in the *person-in-context relational view* (Ushioda, 2009), this perspective aims to remind teachers that students are people, and that formulaic approaches to teaching language may disregard the potential growth of their individual agency and participation. This view can help teachers to focus upon pedagogical and interpersonal practices that "encourage students to develop and express their own identities through the language they are learning—that is, to be and become themselves" (Ushioda, 2009, p. 223). This might also include paralinguistic expression. Circular seating, compared with rank-and-file seating, would seem a more natural and organic way to elicit from students their own voices for sharing what they wish to share about themselves, especially from a point of emotional security as an accepted member of the circle. From my experience, I believe circular seating tends to elicit more help-seeking, such as asking for the meaning and spelling of words spoken, more earnestness, such as more details given when describing opinions about a topic, and more playfulness, such as humoristic wordplay and exaggerated facial expressions of emotions (e.g., a sidelong glance of mock reprieve, something best seen by all class members and appreciated to its comic effect from the vantage of the circle). It is also worth noting that the *person in situation* view (Boekaerts, 1993), of a similar ethos, stresses the importance of encouraging students to speak for themselves in an open way about how they feel in the moment, particularly when learning moments are stressful. This allows students to feel that the learning environment is supportive, which increases their sense of control and belonging, and in the long term promotes the maintenance of their emotional well-being (Boekaerts, 1993).

#### 4.9. Context-in-person (extended and embodied cognition)

*Context-in-person* (Murphey, Falout, Fukada, Fukuda, 2012) highlights the view that the emotional and cognitive development of learners is inextricably linked with their social and physical environments, and inextricably linked with their bodily actions and states. In particular, this view can help language teachers to remember that students make meaning from actively observing and participating with others around them. For example, taking and receiving verbal and nonverbal cues, shadowing, sharing attention, solving problems, and helping others to remember are ways that language learners rely on interaction for learning (Atkinson, 2010). Especially when facing each other, as in a circle, people's mirror neurons become activat-

ed as a way of interpersonal understanding, producing effortless connections deep into aspects of the minds of others (Iacoboni, 2009). Several layers of extended and embodied cognition are at play in the following example. One student might be attempting to explain something to the class and not realize it is incorrect. Another student tries to cue him into his mistake as she makes a rising tone of question with her voice, which he unintentionally shadows. Then she becomes more explicit by proffering a word that he intentionally shadows in order to grasp its message. His facial expression conveys his incomprehension, and he prompts her for more help with a pleading gesture. She responds with her own short series of gestures that he also mirrors, and his own actions help him to understand his mistake, recall the proper thing to say, and readjust his explanation to the class. This vignette illustrates the kind of context-in-person learning affordances that I often see students take in circular seating but not usually in rank-and-file seating, if at all.

#### 4.10. Group dynamics, group framing of motivation, emotional contagion

*Emotional contagion* is a pervasive tendency to unintentionally synchronize facial and bodily expressions, vocal tones and rhythms, and other subconscious means of communicating feelings, resulting in “catching” someone else’s emotions (Hatfield, Cacioppo, & Rapson, 1994). Emotional contagion best happens when people face each other, such as when in a circle, and can involve both positive and negative emotions. Consequently, a learning environment promoting positive interactions during language learning is crucial for passing on positive emotions, resulting in a general positive shift in the motivations among all classroom members. Importantly, students feeling poorly motivated, when interacting with others feeling highly motivated, can experience a reframing effect called *group framing of motivation*, in which their views of their own past and present experiences as well as future expectations regarding language learning increase in degree of positivity (Falout, Fukada, Murphey, & Fukuda, 2013).

#### 4.11. Friendship, social networks, social capital

The sociofugal spaces of rank-and-file seating discourage students from talking to one another and forming friendships, yet without friends students are more likely to experience emotional distress at school. Reciprocated friendships in school, meaning mutually close and trusting relationships, have been shown to predict adaptive responses to school-related stressors, prosocial behavior toward others in general, self-beliefs of competency, interest in school, desire to seek academic challenges, and academic achievement (e.g., Altermatt & Pomerantz, 2003; Wentzel, Barry, & Caldwell, 2004). Friendships also expand the potential benefits of resources availa-

ble through social networks, known as *social capital* (Bourdieu, 1985), which can extend beyond the classroom walls and the limited time spent in school. Therefore, the potentials of forming and strengthening friendships within classroom sociopetal spaces, such as circles, can lead to lifetime potentials of support for well-being.

## 5. Classcraft for circular seating

Classcraft is the term I use for a teacher's approach to professional development, preparing syllabi or curricula, determining grades, meeting with students outside of class, and more, in addition to conducting class itself. Like any craft, classcraft is a mixture of art and science, method and intuition, and derived by experiences lived within and outside of classrooms, and imagined by listening to others and reading widely. The general goals may relate to productivity, efficiency, aesthetics, politeness, safety, and any number of things that each teacher feels is necessary or helpful for taking care of others in their learning and taking healthy pride in the craft of teaching. While each teacher's classcraft may be uniquely related to their local context, sharing one's classcraft becomes a dialogical process among teachers as they approach the social crux together.

### 5.1. Choose the room before the course starts, and consider the placement of the circle

From my experiences, rooms that are not much bigger than the circle tend to foster intimacy and interpersonal focus. A little extra space for arranging the circle in different areas, such as nearer or further from the board, may offer extra possibilities for different activities both inside and outside the circle. Large rooms, however, seem to have a tendency to distract by the degree of their open space outside the circle. Especially if the rest of the room retains too many rank-and-file rows, it has an effect, perhaps through context-in-person, to distract students. My hypothesis is that too many leftover rank-and-file rows provoke some students to revert to anti-social tendencies brought on by past experiences in sociofugal learning environments. An exception to this rule-of-thumb, I have found, is in large-sized rooms that do not contain rank-and-file seating, but instead open workstations for small groups to gather. Spaces between these workstations can be opened up for placing the circle within, and intimacy and interpersonal focus seems sustainable.

### 5.2. Limit class size, if possible

Yoneyama and Murphey (2007) argue that a class size of 20-25 students is the maximum capacity for caring, healthy relationships between teacher and stu-

dents and among classmates, particularly for language classes. Feelings of immediacy are a function of propinquity, and in my experience Yoneyama and Murphey's threshold of 25 students generally holds true.

### 5.3. Construct the circle first thing before or just as class starts

Although a circle can be established at any time, I have found that students seem to initiate the circle making activity faster when it is done at the beginning of class. Afterward, the circle can be disassembled and reassembled as needed during the rest of the class session. Students also seem most likely to internalize this norm of making the circle when they walk into the classroom, maybe as it is a time of a state of readiness for trying something different in the school day.

### 5.4. Ask students to make the circle themselves and take apart when finished, giving them responsibility for it

Making the very spaces in which students will together share their experiences and imaginations is a first step for taking responsibility in their own learning, and perhaps a first step for creating many positive emotions such as confidence and self-respect. Completing the circle shows them that something is already accomplished in the first few minutes of class through their cooperative effort.

However, as Madigan (1992) cautions, students may not be ready or willing to accept responsibility for participating in active roles in learning, and therefore teachers can be almost certain to encounter some kind of resistance. Madigan explains a process that teachers might take to get beyond this resistance, and I would add that this process works best if used at the very start of a course. First, do not panic. Show empathy with the students without analyzing their feelings. Simply acknowledge and accept their discomfort with sincerity, and show faith that they can get past this stage of resistance. Be ready to re-explain the requirements or guidelines and then wait patiently. For example, students who wish to hide or test the teacher may set their chairs somehow out of the circle or off-center, so that their chairs are behind other's chairs, or not oriented toward the center of the circle. In this case, remind the students of the acceptable positioning, such as the tautology, "please make a circular circle." Remembering that students would probably show resistance no matter what the activity is helpful for the teacher's patience. The final point is that by modeling respect, relationships of trust might be established between teacher and students and among classmates during whole-class activities (Madigan, 1992).



5.5. Occasionally set a good example by helping, but not to the point that students expect it

While it is important to establish the expectations that the students are responsible for creating the seating arrangement in which they will learn together, it is equally important for the teacher to model behaviors of helpfulness and collaboration. Take care that the expectations are not reversed, or else the students will start to gradually wait and watch until the teacher makes the circle, which defeats the lessons of self-respect, social responsibility, and taking on an active role for one's own learning.

5.6. Use the circle regularly, and scaffold its newness to the students with easy activities at first

Students unaccustomed to speaking before others will understandably feel nervous, confused, and worried of being judged poorly when they first sit in a circle. Students may need to gradually become acclimated to it, therefore limiting time spent in the circle at first, and gradually increasing the length of experiences in the circle might help them to adjust. Also the activities at the beginning might be designed for brief and simple contributions to whole-class activities, such as verbal or nonverbal activities both new and familiar (e.g., the rock-scissors-paper hand game), call-and-response shadowing activities or sing-alongs, simple declarative statements, and rapid question-and-answer activities. Later on, the activities can be increased in complexity, amount of time speaking, and degree of open discussion.

5.7. Do various activities with the circle that apply its numerous advantages

Being inventive and experimental, teachers can discover many uses for the circle, especially those things that might not be easily done otherwise. For example, Dörnyei and Murphey (2003) describe a string toss game in which the students toss a ball of string randomly around the circle. Each student who catches it grabs hold of the string before sending off the rest of the ball into the air toward another student. In a short while, everyone becomes part of the network of string that symbolizes their connections to each other. "This game gives a structured opportunity for students and teachers to realize the emotional ties amongst themselves and to share some positive feelings by giving others in the group [those who catch the string] a compliment or word of thanks" (Dörnyei & Murphey, 2003, p. 163).

5.8. Be flexible with seating arrangements and don't overuse any one pattern

Considering the results from their meta-analysis on various seating arrangements, Wannarka and Ruhl (2008) caution, "teachers should let the nature of the task dictate seating arrangements" (p. 89). Additionally, Ehrman and Dörnyei (1998) note that "positions in a circle are not always equal in their communicative 'status'" (p. 295), as members disproportionately direct their talk to those directly opposite them rather than equally around, "therefore, it may be worth moving students around from time to time" (p. 295).

5.9. Be a good model, sit upright, show attention; students will mirror your posture and disposition

The mirror neurons of all members in the circle are susceptible to the influences they exert on each other. This brings the teacher a chance to consciously display nonverbal readiness for open communication, respect, trust, and empathy. Students can unconsciously mirror the teacher's positive postures, and through emotional contagion, the postures may spread. The less that stands in between them, such as desks, the more bodily displays that can be seen, and thus the more likely these postures will be replicated and the emotions associated with them embodied. When doctors, managers, and teachers go without their desks, the more likely their patients, subordinates, and students feel relaxed and that they are given attention and fair treatment (Allan & Pease, 2006; Knapp & Hall, 2010). Teachers might also take careful notice of students' postures and dispositions. Regardless of gender, age, national and cultural background, or years of experience, teachers from Gregersen's (2007) study, after receiving a list of criteria for nonverbal behaviors of language learning anxiety, could more accurately decode students' nonverbal displays of anxiety. This implies that teachers may be able to improve their recognition of students in emotional need and prepare themselves to proactively address such moments, such as through displays of teacher immediacy.

5.10. Make sure things are returned properly, cleaner than before you came into the classroom

General good classcraft dictates such polite approach regardless of seating arrangements involved. It shows consideration for the next group using the room, even if this includes the same teacher or means the same group. Moreover, it prevents causing irritation to incoming teachers who may expect the room to be standing in the traditional or usual arrangement.

## 6. Unbolting thinking

Teachers who languish along with their students in rooms with bolted-down tables and chairs may have been conditioned over time to believe that they have no alternative but to stick with the given room and its dully prearranged seating. Perhaps they fantasize about unbolting the seating themselves, only knowing that such action would be impractical task-wise if not maladaptive career-wise. A practical and adaptive approach, however, may be in unbolting their thinking that they and their students are stuck in their bolted-down settings. It may be helpful to remember that people who retain high hopes, as compared with those whose hopes have fallen, are more likely to reach their goals (Snyder, Cheavens, & Simpson, 1997).

### 6.1. High-hope thinking

Two necessary aspects of maintaining one's *hope* involve pathway thinking and agentic thinking. *Pathway thinking* (waypower) is the ability to imagine one or more different ways to reach one's goals, including the ability to generate alternative ways when impediments arise. The ability to initiate and continue pursuit of the goal along one or more of the pathways is known as *agentic thinking* (willpower). High-hope thinking can be invigorated and sustained through social support networks and communally shared goals, including shared recognition and respect for individually separate but mutually-complementary goals; whereas low-hope thinking can be instigated and sustained through lack of goals, communication, and cooperation, and individually or communally focusing on failure (Snyder, 1994; Snyder et al., 1997). For teachers who feel frustrated by lack of choice about their present seating conditions, high-hope thinking can help them to embrace obstacles to achieving circular seating in their classrooms as opportunities to learn more about their situations and those of others who might be of benefit, generate multiple creative solutions, activate the energy to stay committed to their goal and forge onward, and reframe the goal if useful.

### 6.2. Possible positions

The immediate goal might not be of procuring circular seating arrangements per se but of engineering classroom positions for the students that more aptly avail whole-class communication. The chairs and desks may be fixed, but the people are not. Provided the class size is small enough, students can reposition themselves to sit in only the chairs that run the circumference of a block of

desks, turning toward each other in an open rectangular arrangement. Larger classes might instead stand alongside the walls around the room, facing inward. This formation is also conducive for pair and group rotations, adding further repositioning possibilities, and offers relief from cramped seating. With students lined around the room, the desks and spatial expanse amid them, however, may act as a barrier to immediacy and to verbal and nonverbal communication. Instead, taking everyone outdoors into an open space to gather in concentric circles can help establish greater propinquity within larger classes, although students may not feel comfortable sitting on the ground or standing too long. Such rearrangements may therefore provide only a temporary change of environment more suited for whole-class communication. Pathway thinking might lead to further creative repositioning of students appropriate for each given situation, while agentic thinking helps teachers to continue searching for even better alternatives.

### 6.3. Possible places

Every day brings another chance to discover a place for holding classes. Pathway thinking can help teachers to work around their preconceptions, help keep their eyes freshly opened and their imaginations ever generating ideas about where their next classes might meet. Agentic thinking can embolden teachers to take adventurous expeditions into classrooms they had never peeked into, or buildings they had never entered. They might realize possibilities in inconspicuous places, such as a library lecture hall, a practice theater, an empty cafeteria wing cordoned off after peak hours, or simply a classroom virtually abandoned for want of a more central location on campus. Unfettered by the assumption that these newfound coveted sites are unattainable, teachers with high-hope thinking become eager to learn who might help in requisitioning these special places for their classes.

### 6.4. Possible people

In general, those with high-hope thinking are more gregarious than those with low-hope thinking, creating a wider circle of friends, acquaintances, and allies (Snyder et al., 1997). Teachers with ongoing professional relationships in various areas of their schools already have a strong base of social capital from which to seek advice or assistance about requisitioning special classrooms and non-traditional places for classes. Explaining the purpose, such as potentiating many positive social psychological aspects in learning, can be key to attaining these goals. First, it can establish a ground for identifying shared or mutually

compatible goals, such as taking countermeasures to reduce student attrition at the school, or meeting a quota of alternative-style lectures held in that library lecture hall in order to maintain outside funding. Second, it can open deeper discussion with recommendations for using more suitable or more possible-to-procure places for circular seating arrangements. And third, it can help turn someone else into an advocate for the cause, leading to fundamentally greater organizational changes, such as purchasing chairs and desks with wheels, or involving teacher or student voice in redesigning classrooms. Additional pathways for teachers with high-hope thinking include asking in advance, which allows others the time to plan and act. Also, if at first told something is not possible, teachers with high-hope thinking might remember that policies and administrations change occasionally, and therefore the same question might be worth asking again.

Finally, high-hope thinking comes from and is sustained by engaging with others (Snyder et al., 1997). Asking other teachers how they arrange their seating and conduct cooperative or whole-class activities, particularly when constrained to bolted-down settings, and how they may have otherwise liberated their classes from such settings, can supply both practical solutions and fresh hope.

## 7. Rounding it up

Circular arrangements of sitting, standing, and dancing can be seen in human communication and education ranging across geographic locales and historical periods, from prehistory to antiquity to modern times. Circular arrangements bring an elemental force of human connection brought about by the people within them. Proximity, face-to-face orientation, and eye contact afforded by the circle create an all-includable social action zone for the whole class. Time spent in the action zone fosters empathy, respect, and trust among potentially all class members. In this environment, students can feel a sense of belonging, which provides a safe base to expand their imaginations about what can be possibly said and done in the world, while finding their own voices to express themselves and their own values to take action. These conditions allow for acceptance of others and community-based affirmations of each member to flourish, verbally and nonverbally, which provides growth in individual self-direction and well-being (Rogers, 1961). Teachers are therefore invited to experiment with various applications of circular arrangements of students in their classrooms, develop their own pedagogical purposes and applications with this practice, and share their classcraft and high-hope thinking with other language teachers for helping us all approach the social crux.

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